



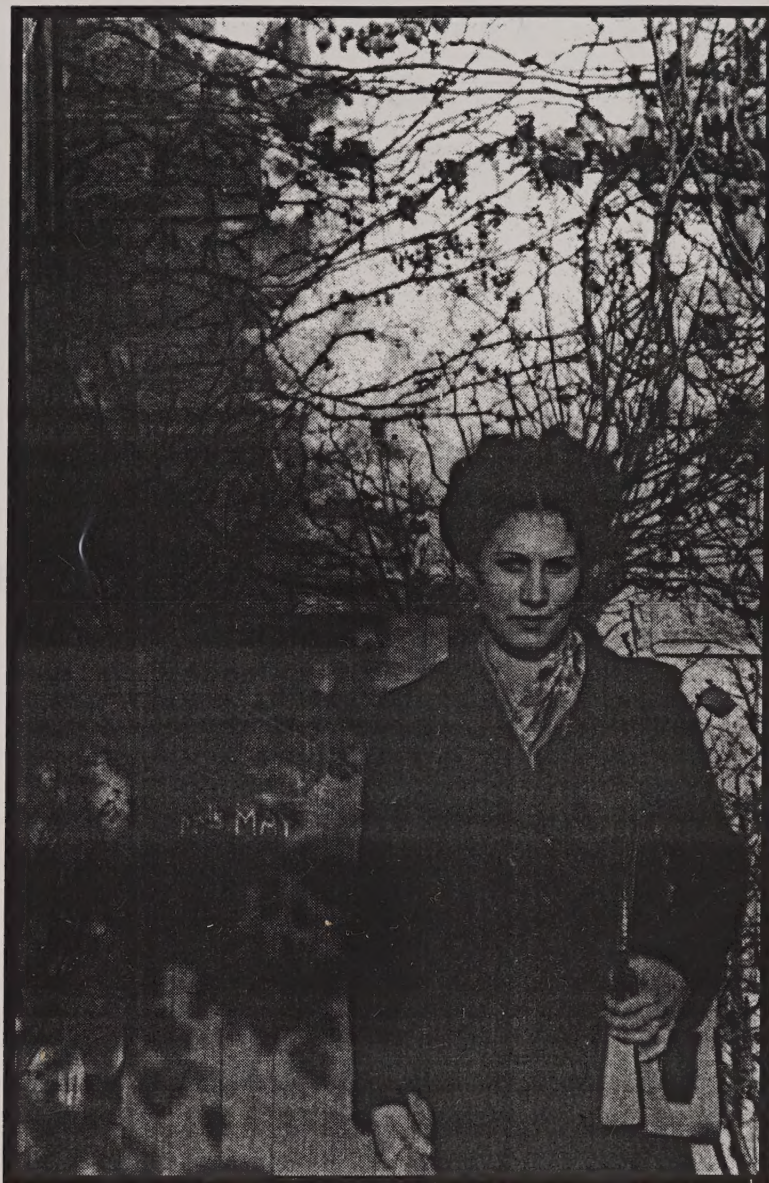
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RECOLLECTIONS OF
THE WAR YEARS



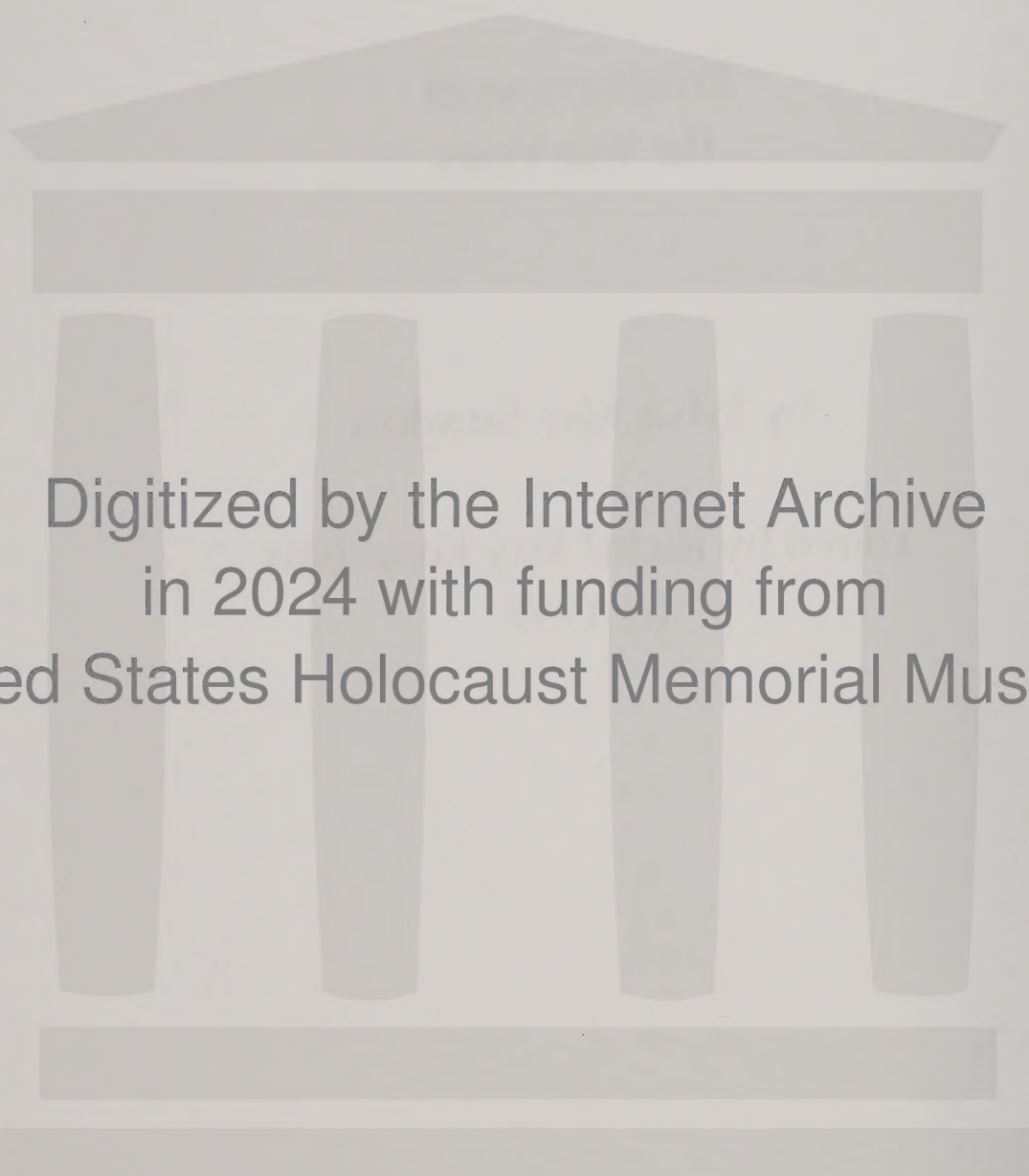
SYLVIE MAY SAUNDERS

EDITED BY RACHEL MAY KOPPELMAN

**RECOLLECTIONS of
THE WAR YEARS**

by SYLVIE MAY SAUNDERS

**edited by RACHEL MAY KOPPELMAN
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To my children, Michèle and Peter;
my grandchildren, Rachel, Jed, Susie, Melanie, Liana:

You have often asked me questions about my childhood and about
the War Years. I thought that reading my story would give you
an insight on how these events shaped my personality.

My experiences in World War II as an adolescent and young adult have profoundly influenced my values and outlook on life. They account for my tendency to take things in stride, handling failure and success with equal facility.

Conversely, however, as my teenage years were spent in simply trying to survive, I never really learned how to depart from total seriousness and so to enjoy myself.

I was born in Westhoffen, a village in Alsace, France, where my father's family had been established for over two centuries. The political history of Alsace is rather complicated. My grandparents were born under French rule, and thus were French citizens. After the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, Alsace was claimed by Germany. My parents, both born after the German takeover, were born German citizens. Alsace remained under German rule until the end of World War I in 1918.

Many Alsatian families kept their allegiance to France and lived for the day when Alsace would be returned to France. It was forbidden to learn and speak French, but in both my mother's and my father's family the children were taught French. To polish their French, my parents were each sent to French-speaking countries. Mother was sent to La Chaux de Fonds in Switzerland and Father to live with his aunt in Paris.

My parents met at the beginning of World War I. My mother lived in Biesheim, near Colmar, a village near the border of the Rhine river. My father had been mobilized for military service by the German Kaiser and was stationed in Biesheim before he was sent to the Russian front. Most Alsatian soldiers were sent East because they could not be trusted to fight against the French and would defect to France whenever they could. While they were stationed in the village waiting to be sent to Russia, the soldiers participated in the village life. My father met my grandfather while he was attending services at the synagogue. He was invited to the Sabbath meals, where he met my mother. My Tante Marguerite met Oncle Alphonse in the same way.

I remember my mother's account about these War Years. Alsace did not become a battle front during World War I, and the young ladies spent their time embroidering their trousseau while waiting for their fiancé's return. The Alsatian embroidered tablecloth we use dates from that period.

The linen was homespun and my mother designed and embroidered it.

France and its Allies won the war and in 1919 Alsace was again part of France. My parents were married on May 18, 1919, and settled in Westhoffen.

Westhoffen is a small agricultural village; in the 1930s it was inhabited by about 1,200 people. In this post-World War I period Alsace was adjusting to its change of nationality. The great part of the population was pleased to be French again, but the changes to French law were made gradually. One of the challenging changes was the reintroduction of French. Since 1870, German had been the official language. Standard written German was taught in the schools, but everyone spoke the Alsatian dialect, a mixture of German and French.

At our home we spoke only French. My closest friends, Solange and Lili, were also brought up speaking French. This set us apart from our schoolmates, who had to struggle to learn to read and write and to do this in a new language. However, German was also taught in the early grades and the other children did have an advantage there.¹

So, you see, I grew up being part of a minority. Children want to conform—I remember arguing with my mother about letting my hair grow in order to wear braids and wanting to wear wooden shoes instead of galoshes. Even though my sisters and I felt self-conscious about our different appearance, our schoolmates looked up to us, envying our progressive ways.

Public schools were separated by religious affiliation. When my father grew up, there was a large Jewish community and he attended a Jewish school. After World War I, however, there were only about thirty Jewish families left; and the Jewish children had to attend the Protestant schools. Religious education was part of the school curriculum. Our schoolmates would have their catechism lesson from eight to nine each morning, while we had the advantage of an extra hour sleep and came in at nine o'clock. However, we were given our religious education on Thursdays, a day when the other children did not have school.

For most of the time, there was harmony among the different groups in the village. People respected each other's culture. Around Christmas time, we joined our friends in decorating their Christmas trees; on Passover

¹German was still used in the Protestant Lutheran Church.

we would distribute Matzos. [This was a special treat because Matzos were not available year round and could not be bought at the store, but had to be specially ordered.]

There was no high school in Westhoffen. Most children ended their education at fourteen. I was given the choice of going to boarding school or to live with my grandparents and attend school in Sélestat. My sister Gaby had attended school there, and I decided to go there as well. My Tante Marguerite and her family also lived there. Her husband, Oncle Alphonse, taught Latin, Greek and French at the College de Garçons [College for Boys]. Girls who wanted an academic education were accepted but amounted to only about ten percent of the student body. My uncle was one of my teachers. I enjoyed the companionship of my cousins and became a close friend to my cousin Claude, who was the same age as I was.

Claude was only six months older than I, but very advanced academically—about two school grades ahead of me. I came from an École Primaire, while he had been at the College since the early grades. He helped me to adapt to the College, and I owe much of my scholastic achievements to his patient tutoring. In turn, I was able to help him by giving him moral support. His father was a very strict disciplinarian with his sons but much more yielding with me, and I was able to lessen many punishments. Claude was my best friend and I considered him the brother I never had.



CLAUDE IN 1942

When I returned to Sélestat for the next school year, my uncle had been transferred to Versailles. I missed him and my cousins and became homesick. I went back home and spent that school year enrolled in a correspondence school. It was one of the best years of my adolescence and the clearest recollection I have of my father before he died. I was thirteen years old and was proud to have been given the responsibility to schedule my life. As a hobby, my father had bought about ten sheep. They were part of a flock tended by a local herdsman. To reward me for keeping the ledger for this little enterprise, my father gave me one of the sheep. I watched it grow and reproduce, and took great pleasure in having its wool processed and knitting sweaters from this truly homegrown product.

The following school year I returned to Sélestat. I had to take an exam to qualify my admission to the next grade, but I did not have a problem keeping up and ended the school year at the head of my class.

It was now 1939. The peaceful childhood that I had experienced was about to be disrupted by the chaos that had started to beset the outside world.



I WAS THE ONLY GIRL IN MY CLASS AT SELESTAT IN 1939.

The outbreak of World War II was no surprise. Hitler's rise to power in 1933 and his motto, "Lebes Raum,"² made it inevitable. We saw the Jewish refugees arrive from Germany; most of them had left their belongings behind them. I was about ten years old when Hitler first came to power, and my friends and I spent much time speculating on which possessions we would take along if or when we would have to leave home. My parents foresaw what would be happening, and began to talk about evasive measures. My father considered selling his thriving wine business and emigrating to the United States. It isn't easy to pull up stakes, however, and the idea was never implemented. Gaby married Uncle Robert in December, 1938, and although we were not entirely serious about leaving, this gave us another reason to stay. The stress of the impending war took a toll on my father's health. On July 17, 1939, he had a fatal heart attack at age fifty-five.

I was fifteen years old.



MY PARENTS: MARTHE HEMMENDINGER MAY AND THÉODORE MAY.

² "Lebes Raum" or "room to live," referred to Hitler's plan to expand his territory by conquering foreign countries so that the Aryan people, whom Hitler considered superior, would have enough space to live.

The Germans invaded Poland in September 1939. World War II had begun. The part of Alsace bordering the Rhine was evacuated; and my aunts, uncles and their families, who lived in Strasbourg were sent to other parts of France. We rented an apartment in Montargis and sent some of our possessions there but remained home. We had a house full of people. Robert had been mobilized and Gaby, who was now pregnant, came back home. My grandparents also came to stay with us. We also had officers stay at our house; the village was full of soldiers and the rooms were requisitioned by the Army.

My mother was busy running our wine business. My uncle Lix, who was my father's partner, had been mobilized but was stationed nearby. The period from September of 1939 to June of 1940, was called, in retrospect, "la drôle de guerre"—the phony war. There was no action on this front, and we began to settle back into a somewhat routine existence. We waited anxiously to see what was going to happen, not seeing a good outcome as a possibility.

In May of 1940, I was hospitalized for treatment of a stomach ulcer in Bischwiller (near Haguenau). I had developed a digestive problem, probably brought on by stress: at age sixteen, I was trying to run our household, my mother was working, the war was going on.... When my mother came to pick me up at the hospital, she and the driver were attacked by a plane. The plane swooped down at them; as you can imagine, it was an extremely frightening experience. Despite all this, however, we were still able to rejoice when good news finally arrived. In December of 1939, Gaby's daughter, Dina, was born; and Robert, who was in the front line, came home on a furlough.

In spring of 1940, the German army invaded Belgium and marched toward Paris. Alsace was surrounded. The regiment that was stationed in Westhoffen was leaving to regroup. Scared by what might be happening to us after the Germans arrived, my family decided to leave. Our fear was that we would be sent to concentration camps. Although by then we did not know all the horrible details of what went on, we knew of their existence. (As it turned out, the Jews who had stayed were expelled to the French "Zone Libre.") It was the "Debâcle"—a time when the world seemed to be steeped in chaos. We had a small car and nine of us—Oncle Lix; his sister, Tante Jeanne; her two sons, Paul and Fred; my mother; my two sisters; six-month-old Dina;

and myself—piled into it. My grandparents stayed; they felt that as older people they would be safe.

We left on June 14, a Saturday, at 3 o'clock in the morning. The roads were congested with people fleeing and the military troops retreating. I am sure that you have seen newsreels showing caravans of refugees. Picture us in that mass of people, with German planes swooping overhead, adding to our anxiety. We arrived at Auxonne on the evening of June 15, and were lucky to find a room where we could rest for a few hours. We got up at 4 AM and were told that the Germans were 8 km behind us. We got back on the road—in the distance we saw heavy columns of smoke and worried that we would have to make our way through the fire. It was St. Jean de Lausnes burning³.

Slowly we made our way to Beaune. After passing Beaune, we were in the mountains and felt less vulnerable than when we traveled in the plains.

On the evening of June 16 we arrived in Decize. Decize is an oddly built little town, located on an island between two bridges. Our attempts to find a room were unsuccessful. Eventually, though, a woman took pity on 10-year-old Jacqueline, who was crying, and let us spend the night on the benches inside her restaurant, called Café de Paris. We were settling down when our hostess told us that the bridge we were planning to cross the next day was mined and would be blown up. We were so exhausted that we decided to stay; we hadn't believed that it would happen so quickly.

The next morning, at 6 o'clock, we were ready to go on. We lined up behind the cars in front of the bridge and waited for 4 hours, hoping to be able to get through. Finally, we were told that we could cross the bridge on foot—we had to leave our car with our few belongings. We had slipped down another notch; we felt helpless, but marched on. My mother addressed the officer in charge, "What can we do?"

The answer was, "Madame, vous êtes sur le front (You are at the front)."

Most of the houses on our way were deserted; their owners had fled. We knew that we could not get very far on foot. Discouraged, we sat down at

³ St. Jean de Lausnes was a small village, probably set on fire by the Germans.

the side of the road. Miraculously, a car stopped in front of us, and a woman instructed her driver to take us to the Turpin farm.

It was a large farm. Monsieur Turpin told us that we were welcome to stay, but warned us that his family was preparing to leave. We were given a farmhand's room. I slept in the hayloft. The Turpins were very hospitable. The next day, while we were eating lunch with them, one of their friends came by and advised them to leave. They hitched two horses on a wagon, loaded some of their belongings, and left. They had four children, including a three-week-old baby, and an elderly grandmother. After our sad trip we thought that they looked very vulnerable in such a transport, but we felt that we could not discourage them from leaving. They put the cattle out to pasture and told us to feel free to help ourselves to food or milk from the cows. We did not know how to milk cows, but fortunately never had to develop this skill; a few hours after they had left, the Turpins returned home. The armistice had been signed. We stayed at the farm for five more days, helping with house work as much as possible.

Each morning, Uncle Lix went back to Decize to see if he could recover our car. German troops occupied the town. The order of the day was for the soldiers to be pleasant, polite and helpful. They were to give the impression that they came as friends and not as conquerors. Uncle Lix had told the soldiers that we wanted to recover our car so that we could return to Alsace. He spoke German to them, which they viewed as a welcoming gesture, and they allowed him to recover the car. Small boats periodically made the back-and-forth journey between the banks of the Loire River. To recover our car, Uncle Lix had to drive down the embankment, onto two boats, and drive up on the other side. To this day, I still don't understand how two small boats could have supported a car and carried across the river—it was definitely quite a feat!

You can imagine how happy we were to have our means of transportation back. However, this presented us with a new dilemma: where to go.

A new government had been formed, headed by Marechal Pétain, a hero from World War I. Its capital was Vichy. France was to be divided into two zones: a free zone and an occupied zone. Naturally, we headed toward

the free zone. Before we had left home, an officer, Lieutenant Villars, who was stationed in Westhoffen, had mentioned Saint-Amand-Montrond to us as a possible place to go. Lt. Villars was in charge of providing food and lodging for the troops and became a frequent visitor to our house. He had said that his wife was a clerk at the Town Hall at Saint-Amand and would help us. As we made our way toward the "Zone Libre," we got to a crossroads. One of the signs said Saint-Amand, and so it was that we decided to go there. The town was in turmoil; refugees were everywhere. Space was at a premium. At the Town Hall we found Madame Villars. Her husband had mentioned us to her and she appreciated the hospitality we had extended him. She was able to get an apartment for us. My mother, my sisters, Dina and I settled down in a very small 2-room apartment. Uncle Lix, Tante Jeanne, and her sons found a house down the street. Our apartment was located in the center of town, right across the street from the best hotel in town. While we were very happy to have a roof over our heads, we experienced a culture shock. There was no running water; we had to carry pails of water up one flight from a well in the yard. The toilets were in an outhouse. However, this lack of comfort was the least of our problems—we were worried about my grandparents, Robert, and our future.

We soon learned that Robert had been taken prisoner with his unit. Prisoners of war were protected by the Geneva Convention and were allowed to write and receive two letters per month. My grandparents were able to travel to Versailles, where my Tante Marguerite and her family lived.

We were settling down. The hope that our exile would be a short one sustained us. It was forbidden to listen to the broadcasts from England; nevertheless we listened every evening to the "Free France" broadcast from there.

Jacqueline and I went to school and made good friends there. Uncle Lix went to Saumur and returned with his wife and sons. Saumur was in the Occupied Zone, and Uncle Lix's family had been evacuated there at the beginning of the war.

Our lodgings improved slightly: an attic apartment became available in our building and Gaby and Dina moved into it. We bought a bicycle, which was a very necessary mode of transportation. The area surrounding Saint-

Amand was agricultural, and I often rode to the countryside to buy milk, eggs, and other useful farm products. Food and clothing were rationed. I learned to barter: adults were issued coupons for cigarette rations which were easily traded for more sustaining wares. We were able to send packages to Robert.

In October of 1940, the Vichy government proclaimed a decree spelling out the "Statute of the Jews." Under this decree, Jews were banned from public office, teaching, and military command. The Vichy government also ordered the internment of foreign-born Jews into "special camps." There were many foreign Jews among the refugees in Saint-Amand. We felt safer than them and tried to help them. My cousin Gilbert told me that he and his brother Jean-Pierre circulated on bicycle at night to warn these people of their imminent arrest and offer them hiding places. Often their warning was ignored. Gilbert and Jean-Pierre's father, Oncle Lix, had obtained information of these arrests from friends at the police headquarters. Gaby also became involved in helping these refugees. Many of them were very concerned about the safety of their children. In spring of 1941, I escorted five children to a hiding place in the Creuse. We traveled by train, the children carrying false identity papers. After nightfall we arrived at the safe place, a château. It was a relief to turn over my charges, as if a huge weight had been lifted from my shoulders. In hindsight, I realize that this was quite an accomplishment for a seventeen-year-old. War matures everyone very rapidly.

Increasingly, Vichy gave in to the Nazis' demands for control of the Jews. They ordered a census of the Jews and established quotas for admissions to colleges and universities. While many Jews got false identification papers, we stupidly followed orders and had "Juif" stamped on our identification cards. I finished high school but didn't attempt at this time to further my education formally—the quota system made the prospect of attending a university practically impossible. I continued to study, taking lessons in English and math.

In November of 1942, the Germans occupied the rest of France. The Vichy government still existed, but was controlled increasingly by the Germans. Germany was in great need of manpower and demanded that all

the unemployed French be sent to Germany to work there. My mother decided that I should have a profession. Again, Madame Villars helped us. She introduced me to Mme Malassiné, a pharmacist, who trained me as a “Préparatrice en Pharmacy.” I don’t think that there is an equivalent for this profession in the United States. During the three years that I was with her, I learned to do everything a pharmacist would do. In those days, the job consisted of making pills, potions, and salves for prescriptions. The pharmacist had the responsibility, but I was essentially doing the work. Mme Malassiné became a close friend; her husband was in captivity, and she included me in her social life. Besides pharmacy, she taught me many skills needed for our survival. We made sugar out of sugar beets, tanned rabbit skins for mittens, cured tobacco leaves... The rations for clothing were insignificant and we learned to be quite ingenious. One day, while rummaging through a junk shop, I discovered a large stack of discarded cretonne drapes. Inspired by Margaret Mitchell’s *Scarlett O’Hara*, I bought them. After a bleaching and dyeing, the drapes were transformed into dresses, robes, pocketbooks and matching straps for the wooden soles we used as shoes.

By this time, we had very much settled into the patterns of normal life. Although our lives may have seemed routine and uneventful on the surface, we had learned to live with uncertainty and fear. My cousins Roland and Claude had crossed the demarcation line—the line separating the occupied and free zones—with falsified papers. Claude stayed with us during the summer of 1943. We learned that my mother’s brother, *Oncle Lucien*, had been arrested in *Perigueux*. My mother went there. Undaunted, if ill-advised, she went to the Gestapo to try to get him liberated! We were fortunate that she wasn’t arrested—you couldn’t win any arguments with the Gestapo. *Oncle Lucien* was sent to the *Buchenwald* concentration camp.



LEFT: OVERLOOKING THE CANAL
THAT RAN THROUGH SAINT-
AMAND.

RIGHT: MY MOTHER LOVED
SPENDING TIME WITH DINA,
HER FIRST GRANDCHILD, WHO
WAS GROWING UP WITHOUT
A FATHER



Nineteen forty-four was the most tragic and traumatic year of my life. On June 6, the long-awaited debarkation from the liberating troops took place. This day, known as D-Day, unleashed a series of events that are engraved in my mind.

The underground, called the Maquis, had been very active since the beginning of the occupation. At that time, I didn't know that my cousins Gilbert and Jean-Pierre belonged to this clandestine group. They were only nineteen and seventeen years old, but spent many nights recovering and hiding parachuted arms. The Maquis leaders knew on June 5 that the debarkation of the Allies was to take place the next day. They misinterpreted their orders from London and thought that they were to liberate Saint-Amand as soon as the debarkation took place. They assembled their men. About 70 resistants met at Clérins, a small hamlet near Saint-Amand. Using motorcycles, cars, and trucks, they set to liberate the town. We were glued to the radio when we heard the church bells ring. We soon joined the elated crowd in the streets. We thought that at long last we were liberated.

When the Germans took over the Free French Zone in 1942, they occupied the large towns. In the smaller towns, such as Saint-Amand, they had the Milice—their French sympathizers—do their dirty work. The Miliciens were in charge. On the evening of June 6, the resistants took over the Town Hall and the Sous Préfecture without encountering any opposition. As their function was administrative, these two institutions were not controlled by the Milice. The Milice headquarters were in a large villa. The resistants then surrounded the villa. Francis Bout de l'An, the Milice chieftain, was at the Bourges Milice headquarters at the time these events occurred. His wife, Simone Bout de l'An, his two children, and his mother were also at the villa. At the urging of Simone Bout de l'An, the eight Miliciens who were with her in the villa surrendered without a fight, and gave their weapons up. They filed out of the villa with the Bout de l'An family. Inside the villa, the resistants found lists of Miliciens and later arrested some of them. There was no prison in Saint-Amand and the resistants took their prisoners to the Town Hall. All these events took place during the evening of June 6. We woke up the next day to a holiday atmosphere; the stores were closed, flags were flying. Posters were exhorting

the citizens to join the resistants. Over two hundred did join them and were immediately armed. Encouraging rumors were being circulated: Bourges was surrounded; the Allies had disembarked in Marseilles... We were hopeful that our liberation would come quickly.

However, the euphoria of the streets was not matched at the Sous Préfecture. Van Gaver, the chief of the Maquis, who had taken charge, learned that all the nearby large cities had remained calm. They realized that their victory was short-lived; they would not be able to hold the town if the Germans attacked.

Bout de l'An left Bourges for Vichy looking for help. From there, he called the Sous Préfecture in Saint-Amand and spoke to Van Gaver, who told him, "We are holding your family and thirty Miliciens as hostages. If you attack, they will be shot." The resistants put up a great front, but knew that they had to plan evasive action. A German reconnaissance plane had flown over the town, and a phone call from nearby Charenton informed the Resistants that the Germans were on their way. Van Gaver and his council decided on a hasty retreat, taking the captured Miliciens with them. They were holding 25 of them, including seven women—Bout de l'An's mother and children were left in Saint-Amand.

During the night of June 7, a German battalion took up its position on the Saint-Amand outskirts. It was a group charged with maintaining order. On June 8, they entered the town at dawn, shooting at anyone they saw. I had spent the night at the Malassinés. As soon as I heard about the new state of affairs, I decided to go back to my family. The distance between the Place du Marché, where the pharmacy was located, and Rue du Dr. Valet, where we lived, was short, about a city block. I stayed close to the houses as I ran down the street. It was a terrifying experience—the closest that I had come to being under gunfire. The street was deserted. As I scurried along, shots of gunfire sounded and there was a smell of smoke. As I passed by a hardware store, the shopkeeper saw my precarious situation and urged me to take shelter inside. Watching through the cracks of the shuttered window, we saw the soldiers in battle dress, their faces blackened, looking dreadful. They were entering houses at random and taking prisoners. I was terrified and decided to dispose of my identification card with "Juif" stamped on it. I can still see myself

tearing it up and flushing it down the toilet. When the street seemed quieter, I got back on the road. I found that the house next to ours had been set on fire. My mother and sisters were across the street at the Hôtel de la Poste. After the fire was under control, my mother and I went to our apartment. We had hidden our money and jewelry under a plank in the attic and knew that it was no longer safe there. Our friends, the Chotards, had offered their hospitality—a very risky thing for them to do. We had met the Chotards though their daughter Raymonde, a schoolmate of Jacqueline. They lived on the outskirts of Saint-Amand. We went to their house and buried our recovered belongings in their garden.

It was now June 8. Another German column had arrived during the night. German planes flew over the town at such low altitudes that one of them touched the tip of a tree and crashed, killing its pilot. We were persuaded that the town would be bombed and annihilated. By this time, nineteen people had been killed and two-hundred arrested. Francis Bout de l'An and his entourage had been waiting in Sancoins, about 20 km from Saint-Amand, for the town to be under control before returning. The group arrived back in Saint-Amand at about noon. Their first move was to take over the Sous Préfecture; from then on they were in complete charge of the town. The Miliciens searched the homes of resistant people and arrested about 60 members.

Bout de l'An then left for Vichy to get more help. The Milicien in charge at the Sous Préfecture, Vigier, was a local man; and the mayor of Saint-Amand, Sadrin, was able to persuade him to liberate some of the people taken prisoner by the Milice. When Bout de l'An found out, he was furious. He ordered that the remaining prisoners be sent to Vichy and issued an ultimatum: if his wife was not returned within the next 48 hours, all the prisoners, now considered hostages, would be killed, and he would destroy the town. He also decided to replace Vigier, whom he considered too lenient. The man he chose was Lécussan, a fanatic anti-Semite, already well known for his activities against Jews.

When the mayor returned to the Sous Préfecture the next day, June 10, he was shocked to see the posters announcing the reprisals. It occurred to him that the resistants were not aware of Bout de l'An's threats. He knew

that he had to act quickly to let them know and to get Simone Bout de l'An freed. The negotiations took a long time. There were close calls when Bout de l'An's threats were about to be realized. However, a letter written by Simone, asking that the hostages and the town be spared, saved the day. She wrote that she was well treated by the resistants. Simone and the other four women hostages were released and were back in Saint-Amand on June 23. There were anxious days until finally, on June 25, the Miliciens' hostages returned from Vichy.

We stayed with the Chotards for a few days. We had been offered a safer hiding place in the countryside; I don't know why we did not go there. Instead, we went back to our apartment. We had heard that Uncle Lix had gone into hiding—it was fairly well known among the townspeople that his sons were in the Maquis, and he worried about his safety. His sister, Tante Jeanne, stayed at the house. Foolishly, Uncle Lix had been in contact with her, asking for items from his house to be brought to him. The Miliciens, who were frantically searching for information about the Maquis' whereabouts, searched the house, interrogating and threatening Tante Jeanne. She broke down and told them where he was hidden. Uncle Lix was arrested and brought to the Milice headquarters. We had heard of his arrest but did not know what had become of him.

Tante Denise, Uncle Lix's wife, had died in December 1941 of leukemia. In 1943 he had become engaged to Liliane, a nurse, who was working in the City's hospital. On July 12, a body was fished out of the canal running through the town and was brought to the morgue. The doctor performing the autopsy on the unidentifiable body took off the wedding band from the dead man's finger. He showed the ring to Liliane, who recognized it as belonging to Uncle Lix, and came to us to verify the dates of the engraving inside it. The date matched the date of his wedding. We asked his dentist to make a more positive identification. We then learned the details of Uncle Lix's horrible death: after he had been tortured by the Milice, he was shot in the head and thrown into the canal.

We were able to get his remains released for burial, but were warned

not to follow the hearse through the streets as so not to attract any attention. We went to the cemetery where we were joined by a few friends. It was a pitifully sad funeral. Uncle Lix was 45 years old.

Gilbert and Jean-Pierre did not know what had happened to their father. Their group was pursued by a German assault unit who had been summoned by the Milice. They were finally surrounded by the Germans and surrendered after fighting for three hours. Gilbert was wounded—a bullet had gone through his neck. Jean-Pierre dressed his wounds and stood him up before the soldiers came near them. This act actually saved his life—the other nine wounded resistants were shot on the spot. Their leader, Van Gaver, was killed by a grenade. Gilbert and his brother were taken prisoners with the rest of their group. I will relate their adventures later.



FELIX MAY: ONCLE LIX WAS THE FIRST MEMBER OF MY FAMILY TO BE KILLED DURING THE WAR.

Shortly after they fled Saint-Amand on June 7, the resistants split into three groups. One of these groups, headed by Chaillaud, was in charge of the Miliciens captured on June 7. This group was also pursued by the Germans and was constantly on the move to avoid them. In running for their life, the resistants found holding prisoners to be an unacceptable burden. Moreover, the Miliciens knew too much about the resistants' operation and could not be released. Accordingly, they were hung.

On the afternoon of July 20, Lécussan was informed of the execution of the Miliciens. He became enraged and took immediate action. Reprisals were required, and naturally, his fierce anti-Semitism dictated taking his revenge on Jews. They would have to pay for this crime. Eighty Jews were to be arrested—ten for each Milicien killed by the resistants. Lécussan needed help to accomplish this. He did not trust Bout de l'An, whom he considered too soft-hearted, and instead phoned Pierre-Marie Paoli at the Gestapo in Bourges. Paoli was a local boy who had earned the Gestapo's trust by his aggressive actions. The length of the list of his captives was impressive; the Resistance knew of the tortures he inflicted on his victims. Fritz Merdsche, head of the Gestapo in Orleans, approved the planned arrests. They were to take place on the following day, Friday, July 21. In the afternoon, a convoy departed from Bourges for Saint-Amand: a bus with forty-five German soldiers, several cars with Gestapo employees, including Paoli, and about fifteen Miliciens from Bourges. Lécussan greeted them at the town's movie theater, The Rex. He had made it the action center for this event. He had also gathered all the Miliciens from Saint-Amand. There were about 100 people. Three trucks had been commandeered. Lists with addresses arranged by neighborhoods were distributed.

The curfew, which had been established for midnight, had been advanced to ten o'clock. During the afternoon, Tante Jacqueline had been told by her friends that arrests were planned for that evening; trucks were standing by ready to collect the Jews. Somehow we did not react to this warning. I pause to ponder: to this day, fifty years later, I am unable to understand the inertia that caused us to just stay there. There we were, our worldly goods hidden, our closets empty, but somehow not moved to flee in

order to avoid capture. This is the lesson I want you children to draw from my experience: life is the most precious asset; material possessions are only secondary.

In the middle of the night we were rudely awakened by loud knocks at the door. As soon as we opened it, the small apartment was filled with men: German soldiers and Miliciens barged their way through. We were told that we had five minutes to get dressed and to pack some clothes. I forget what we took along. One of the Miliciens noticed some of Dina's toys and asked me where the child was. I told him that the toys belonged to a neighbor's child. "Is she Jewish?" he wanted to know. He accepted my negative answer. My mother, Tante Jacqueline, and I got ready in record time. We worried that they would be looking for Tante Gaby and Dina. The men were already plundering the place, looking for their spoils. We knew most of the people who were already in the truck where our captors put us. They looked dazed and emotionless. The truck took us to the Rex, where we spent the rest of the night. Saturday morning at seven o'clock, we climbed again into the trucks. The captive men had been separated from the women. The round-up had netted twenty-six men and forty-four women and children. The men were put in one truck, women and children into another. The third truck contained the night's spoils. We were incredibly calm during the two-hour trip that took us to the prison in Bourges. I don't think we realized how precarious our situation really was. We hoped to be rescued: the Allies had landed and we really expected, in our naive optimism, to be freed soon.

The prison, called Le Bordiot, was a civilian prison. The Gestapo had taken over a section of it for their prisoners. We spent the hot Saturday afternoon in the courtyard of the prison without food or water. We had been told that we were waiting to be transferred to a concentration camp. That evening, they told us that the transfer had been delayed and put us into prison cells.

We were eight in our small cell: Maman; Jacqueline; myself; two brothers—a twelve-year-old boy and a five-year-old; and their mother and grandmother. The heat was suffocating. The cell had three narrow cots, and we took turns resting on them. One pail was provided for our sanitary needs. The next day we were taken to an interrogation room. The memory of this event remains very vivid: Two Gestapo men and a woman were looking us

over. We were interrogated one person at a time. Their main purpose was to look for any valuables that might previously have been overlooked. After my father died, my mother gave me a signet ring made from his wedding band. It was my talisman and I wore it constantly. Of course, it didn't escape the scrutiny of the woman who searched me. She took it off my finger, causing me to scream. The woman maintained a reassuring tone, telling me that I would get the ring back when I got to the camp. In the meantime, my mother and sister, waiting in the antechamber, heard that scream and were worried. I am not proud of that episode—I had not been physically mistreated, but there I was, worrying about a material possession.

The prison was overcrowded. We were kept separate from the civilian prisoners, but our guards were civilian employees. The two matrons in charge felt sorry for us victims of the Nazis. They reported to us the news of the Allies' advances and the beginning of the German retreat.

Two days after we arrived we heard that a small truck had left the prison, transporting the men who had been arrested with us. We were told that they had their luggage with them. We hoped that they would be rescued before they could reach a camp. The resistants had increased their activities; the trains were sabotaged and the train stations bombarded by the Allies. The good news of the Allies' progress helped us endure the hardships we faced in prison. We were fed cooked beans mornings and evenings with mold-prone bread—many years went by before I could eat beans again. There were mice in the cells; I remember my discussions with the twelve-year-old boy about how best to preserve our bread rations. He thought that we should put some bread out in plain view for the mice so that they would not come near us, while I felt that we should wrap it as best we could so as not to attract them. Some food packages got through to us from Mme Malassiné and other friends. The Red Cross visited one day and brought us food and sundries. A smuggled-in message reassured us about Gaby and Dina. They were in hiding. We were glad that they had been spared this ordeal. There were ten children with us; the lack of proper food was particularly hard on them.

On August 8, the Gestapo told ten women to prepare themselves to be taken to a camp. They chose to take women who were there without any other family members. They told the rest of us to prepare ourselves for

departure, that we would be leaving the next day. The ten women were taken to the courtyard and put into a truck. A friend of ours, Mme Brunschwig, was among those selected for the camp. She was not Jewish, but a Catholic married to a Jew. In fluent German, she made a big fuss and asked that the Gestapo verify her papers. The Gestapo was in a hurry; they released her along with another woman who was in the same situation. "We will be back for you tomorrow," they were told. My mother, Jacqueline, and I were moved to the larger cell and were given the cots that had just been vacated. This cell housed seventeen women and three children.

We gave each other courage. Surely, we would soon be freed. We heard rumors that the Gestapo had left Bourges on August 9 and had been replaced by the Gestapo from Orleans, who themselves fled two days later.

Of the seventy people brought to the prison on July 21, our group of survivors comprised twenty-five women and nine children. On August 17, the civilian director of the Bordiot told us that we were free to go. He said to leave quietly, in very small groups, so as to not attract any attention. The German troops were retreating, but Bourges had not yet been liberated. [We learned later that directives from the "Free French" in London had made the prison director personally responsible for our safe-keeping.] We followed his instructions and walked along, avoiding the town's main arteries. We had no money, no identification papers, and not the slightest idea of how to get back to Saint-Amand from Bourges, about 40 km away. We were ambling along for about fifteen minutes when a young man stopped in front of us. He looked astonished to see us. "Mlle May?" he questioned hesitantly. It was Pierre, the husband of Madeleine, Mme Malassiné's household worker. I remembered him from their courting days, but had not seen him nor Madeleine for a few years. They lived in Bourges, and Pierre took us to their home. The lunch Madeleine improvised for us was the best meal I ever ate. They lent us money to buy the railroad tickets we needed to get back to Saint-Amand.

At that time the Miliciens were fleeing Saint-Amand, taking trucks loaded with pilfered goods with them. They were trying to regroup in Orleans. Lécussan is reported to have boasted, "We'll come back." Many convoys of retreating German troops passed through the town; their officers

had lost their arrogance. They realized that they had lost the war and probably would be taken prisoner. Nevertheless, the townspeople still felt threatened by the frazzled armed men. There was a sigh of relief when in early September 18,000 German soldiers capitulated in Arcay near Saint-Amand.

We were unaware of the town's situation as we arrived in Saint-Amand. We saw the retreating troops, but did not know who had control of the town. We went to our apartment and found it occupied by relatives of our neighbors. We were bedraggled, worn out, and in no position to assert our rights. We went to the pharmacy, where we received a warm welcome. Mme Malassiné had been very upset by our imprisonment. A devout Catholic, she had offered novenas to Saint Jean Bosco for our safe return and felt certain that we would be saved. Her solicitude restored our spirit. We learned that Tante Gaby and Dina were in a nearby village.

Tante Gaby later gave her account of the night of the arrests and the month that followed: At one AM on the night of the arrests, she was awakened by the loud noise of the knocks at the front door. Peering through the shutters, she saw a truck parked in front of the house and heard a German soldier say, "What are we going to do with these people?" and the reply, "We will shoot them." She went to the top of the stairs from where she could view our apartment and saw us leaving. The Auclairs, who lived in the apartment next to ours, were standing in front of their door. Mme Auclair motioned her to be quiet. The beam of a flashlight swept up the stairs but luckily did not detect her. She told Dina what had happened and that they would have to flee in the morning after the curfew was over. Dina, who was four and a half years old, was distraught but helped her mother plan their getaway. Tante Gaby had the presence of mind to put their clothes in a shed in the yard, so as not to be encumbered with luggage. Little Dina reminded her not to forget her purse. Riding the bicycle, they went to the Chotards. M. Chotard retrieved their clothes later in the afternoon. It was prudent for them to leave Saint-Amand as soon as possible. That afternoon, Tante Gaby and Dina were helped to board a train and left for the countryside to stay with the Chagnons, our former neighbors. From there they went to Saint-Pierre-les Bois. Tante Gaby knew Mlle Gohen, a social worker, who had

told her to come there if she needed help. Gaby was given false identification papers and was introduced as a Parisian refugee suffering from amnesia. Known as Mme Robert, she and Dina settled down in a primitive farm house with no water or electricity, located on top of a hill at the edge of the village.

After our liberation, we went to join them. We arrived in Saint-Pierre-les-Bois late morning. Mme Beguin, a member of the resistance who had shielded Tante Gaby and Dina, directed us to the farm house. We saw Dina in front of the house. When she saw us she froze and turned white; I thought that she was going to faint. I learned later that she had thought that we were dead and that she was seeing ghosts. We didn't look like our former selves; we had lost weight and still looked bedraggled. It had only been two days since we had left the prison, and everything still looked unreal.

Saint-Pierre-les-Bois was isolated from the main roads and enjoyed being too unimportant to be occupied. We felt safe there and slowly regained our composure. Mme Beguin, who was the secretary of the municipal government, issued us identity cards. A week later I ventured into Saint-Amand. Liberation committees had been formed and had taken charge of the town. De Gaulle's Free French, along with the Allies, had liberated Paris on August 25. They continued to pursue the retreating Germans going west and did not reach the center of France. I was able to find out that our apartment would be available by the following week and so we planned to return.

An example of the state of confusion prevailing at that time is illustrated by the following incident. We had carried a sack of potatoes given to us by a farmer back to our apartment. The night after we returned, we woke up to loud knocks at the door. Armed, self-appointed vigilantes came to examine the sack. Rumors had suggested that it might contain munitions. To us, this added insult to injury; but it was not unusual, in this state of near anarchy, for such incidents to happen.

We took this in our stride; if any error of judgment was to occur, we accepted gladly that it should be caused by an excess of vigilance on the part of the resistants. All the Miliciens had fled or had been arrested. The official liberation of Saint-Amand took place on September 13. We participated in the ceremonies, but the events of the past three months had tempered our happiness. We were worried about our relatives who were still in captivity

and were concerned about the fate of the people who had been arrested with us and then moved on by the Gestapo. We were very pessimistic about their chance of survival. We had become very friendly with the Levy family, who, like us, were refugees from Alsace. Four members of that family had been taken from the Bordiot. Moise, their son, who had been in hiding, was actively searching for them.

One man, Charles Krameisen, was among the men taken from the prison on July 24. Early in September, he reappeared telling an incredible story. He was a foreigner and spoke French haltingly. When he told the authorities that he had escaped from a massacre, nobody, except Moise, believed him. Moise, whose parents were among the missing, proceeded to enlist the help needed to elucidate this mystery.

I knew the Krameisens. They had two children: a boy about 12 and a girl 15 years old. Around 1942, they had found hiding places for their children. Krameisen was a shy man. Of small stature, he had an unassuming manner and an incredulous look on his face. He did not give the appearance of a hero.

Krameisen gave the following account of his ordeal. At 4 P.M. on July 24, the Gestapo jammed the twenty-six men into a small truck tightly covered with a canopy. Paoli, in uniform of a German officer, and a Milicien sat next to the driver. A car with five uniformed German soldiers and officers followed the truck. After a half-hour ride, the truck stopped, but the motor was kept running. In groups of six, at ten-minute intervals, the men were taken off the truck. Krameisen managed to remain among the last seven on board. He heard rumbling of stones and gunfire, and he felt certain that his companions were being killed. He tried to encourage the remaining prisoners to put up a fight, but they were too lethargic to respond. Krameisen decided to plan his own flight. He took his heavy workboots off, and positioned himself as the last prisoner to leave the truck. In a single file, headed by two German soldiers and followed by two others, the column marched on. At one point, as it was making a right turn, Krameisen turned left and ran as fast as he could. The surprised Germans reacted slowly; this delayed reaction allowed him to gain enough distance to hide in the brambles. Guns were fired in his direction, but he stayed immobile. At

nightfall he saw the illumination of searching lights. A few hours later, when all seemed quiet, he crawled through the fields and hid in a barn. The farmer who found him there the next morning took him to his farm and nursed him for three days. Krameisen moved from farm to farm, aided by the farmers. The German and the Milice were still in charge, and all involved in harboring him were truly risking their lives.

Krameisen arrived in Saint-Amand after its liberation. Moise, with the help of the family members of some of the missing victims, organized a search. They located the farmer, M. Guillemin, who had first helped Krameisen. He confirmed Krameisen's report.

The area surrounding Guillemin's farm was searched for days without revealing any clues. Bordering the farm was a large site called the Polygon, which had been used by the army before the war to carry on experiments. Krameisen recognized the abandoned farm located there. They found the traces of the bullets shot at him at the corner of the building, but there were no other tell-tale signs of more shootings or recently dug graves. As Krameisen's credibility had been established, the searchers obtained more help. A well-sinker, assisted by firemen from Bourges, examined a well located at the property. The well was 35 meters deep, but 10 meters of its depth had been filled and covered with boulders. Arduously, they removed the boulders and uncovered suitcases that had belonged to the missing women.

There were two more abandoned wells on the property. Traces of blood were found on the edge of these wells. Again, boulders were removed, but this time a macabre scene was uncovered: human bodies. The bodies were those of Krameisen's unfortunate companions. At the third well, the scene repeated itself. This time, the bodies of the victims were those of the women who had been in prison with us. The first body to be recovered was that of Marthe Krameisen, Charles' wife. Six weeks had gone by since the search was initiated. It was determined that our companions had been thrown alive into the dry wells.

Sober-looking German prisoners of war were involved in helping to put the victims into their coffins after they had been identified. The thirty-six coffins were brought to Saint-Amand for burial. The mass funeral, held on

October 27, was very impressive. I well remember my thoughts as I followed the cortege: I reflected how close I came to be among these victims and could hardly believe that I had been spared. We were all stricken with grief, but relieved to be able to put our departed friends to rest. Had it not been for Krameisen's courageous determination, we would never have known their fate.

Justice caught up with some of the men responsible for this crime. Paoli and Lécussan were arrested, found guilty, and shot. The Bout de l'An family fled to Italy and remained there until Bout de l'An died. Merdsche, the Orleans Gestapo chief, nicknamed "the Executioner of Orleans," who had sanctioned this horrible crime, was found guilty. He was judged in absentia and given the death penalty by a court in Lyon. He had fled to Germany where he became a judge and, after his retirement, an editor of a legal magazine. The part of Germany where he lived was occupied by the American Army. For some unknown reason they refused his extradition. He died in 1980. One wonders how he was able to live with thousands of deaths on his conscience. The epitaph on his tombstone reads, "Salvation is in the cross."

An American fact-finding mission arrived in Saint-Amand. I was interviewed by them, as were some of the other survivors. The mission was directed by Colonel Munn. His report was sent to the war office—someday I will try to locate it. I wonder if it still exists after fifty years. The war was still going on; the Allies had to engage in terrible battles before Germany signed an armistice. Wounded soldiers were brought to the Saint-Amand hospital. I left my job at the pharmacy to volunteer at the hospital.

In December of 1943, Tante Marguerite, Oncle Alphonse, and Francis were warned that they were going to be arrested by the Germans. They had been wearing the yellow star marked "Juif" since 1942, and Oncle Alphonse had lost his teaching position at the Lycée Hoche (Jews were not allowed to be teachers). After being warned of their arrest, they were hidden by some friends; and then in January of 1944 they were able to get false identity cards and come to the so-called "Zone Libre." My grandparents remained in my aunt's house by themselves for a few weeks before being arrested. They were very fortunate to be put on house arrest at the Rothchild Home for the Aged instead of being deported. My grandfather died on March 3, 1944. He was 83 years old. My grandmother fell and broke her hip, but she was reasonably well cared for and recovered enough to be able to walk with a cane. After our liberation, we were very eager to bring her to Saint-Amand. In the fall of 1944, I persuaded my mother to let me go to Paris to bring her home to us. My friend Fanny was returning to Paris, where her family lived, and I went with her. The French railroad system was still in shambles--damaged overpasses had not yet been repaired, and therefore many connections were not reestablished. We eventually made it to Paris. My grandmother was overjoyed to see me but could not understand how my mother could send me on such a trip. In her mind I was still the sixteen-year-old she had last seen in 1940! I told her that I came to take her back to Saint-Amand, and her first reaction was, "I'll come with you, because I don't want you to travel by yourself." Neither of us had any idea about the adventure this trip would turn out to be. I stayed with Fanny's family for a few days; and after all the formalities for Grandmaman's release were accomplished, we left Paris.

I only vaguely remember going to the train station in a taxi, but I vividly recall our stop in Vierzon. Vierzon was a railroad hub and had been heavily bombarded and sabotaged during the retreat of the German army. When we arrived there, we were told that we would have to change trains and would have to walk quite a distance to make the connection to our train--an impossibility for Grandmaman. However, every problem has a solution, and we surmounted this obstacle by enlisting the help of some soldiers who carried her to the next train. I managed to reach Gaby and let her know our arrival time. She solved the problem of getting my grandmother to our

home by commandeering a bus and driver to pick us up at the train station.

Grandmaman died four months after her arrival, but we were happy to have had her with us, even for this short time. She told us that it was the happiest time of her life; she enjoyed getting to know Dina, her only great-grandchild. Her heart was failing and she was fully cognizant that she was dying. She was surrounded by her family; my aunts had come and it was an emotional reunion for all of us. She talked about all the still unaccounted-for members of our family. We had never told her that Uncle Lucien was in a concentration camp, but had said that he was safely in Switzerland. I always cherished the ring she gave me on her death bed. It had been her engagement ring and it became my new talisman. On March 2, 1945, Grandmaman died at the age of eighty. She had been a remarkable human being.



MY GRANDPARENTS IN 1942.

It was now March, 1945. Alsace had been liberated in November 1944, but the war was raging on. Germany was in her last throes. I was very eager to get back to Westhoffen and talked Maman into coming with me. Again, the trip was an adventure. At one point we were traveling with a convoy of troops. I met American soldiers for the first time and used the English that I had so diligently studied. We arrived in Wasselonne--about 4 km from Westhoffen--in the evening and spent the night at the Hôtel de la Gare. The next morning we were ready to walk to Westhoffen when a horse-drawn wagon stopped in front of us. Monsieur Weiler got off and greeted us with effusion. He had been a friend of my father; he had a large farm and Papa had rented part of his cellars to store wine. We were the first people to return and he was eager to fill us in on the news.

Our business had been taken over by a German named Klemm. He had lived in Alsace before the war and ran a restaurant in Strasbourg, but his real job was as a member of the Fifth Column--a group made up of civilians planted in France by the Germans to function as spies and as saboteurs. He had been a customer of ours and coveted our business. The Germans gave it to him as a reward for his services. M. Weiler told us that Klemm had fled. Two weeks later, when a rocket destroyed the neighborhood near the Meyerhof, where we had our enterprise, the word around the village was that Klemm had tried to get it destroyed.

M. Weiller also told us that all our belongings had been sold at an auction and that there were tenants living in our house. "You are coming home with me," he said, and we accepted his hospitality.

It was an emotional homecoming--we could not believe that what we had been dreaming about for five years was actually happening.

The news of our return spread quickly. The postmistress informed us that a letter addressed to the May family was waiting for us. It was a very sad missive that my cousin Jean-Pierre had asked a friend to forward to his family.

Written on January 18, 1945, it starts by saying: "In two hours I will no longer be part of this world." He writes that he was found guilty and condemned to be shot. "It is hard to die at eighteen years old but I have suffered so much that it leaves me cold. I am innocent of all crime; I just was

too much of a patriot."

Jean-Pierre had been taken prisoner while he was in the Maquis. In the fall of 1944 we had received a postcard from him telling us that he was working in a radio shop in Cologne. He had been in Buchenwald, a concentration camp; but at this stage of the war the need for workers was so great that he had been given this job. We learned later that he was sending radio messages to England.

This letter was a great shock to us and dampened our elated mood. There was other sad news: many of my classmates had been killed or were missing. They had been inducted in the German army and sent to the Russian front. The pastor's son, a doctor, had been in the Resistance and was killed. We found out that while many villagers suffered to be under the German yoke, there were some who were German sympathizers. We were appalled to find the old Jewish cemetery desecrated. It dated from the Middle Ages and my father's ancestors were buried there. The headstones had been removed and used to pave a courtyard. We also learned that Uncle Robert's precious library had perished in a book burning.

We regained the use of our house after two weeks and set about the enormous job of finding our furniture. The Germans had kept meticulous records of the auction where our household goods had been sold, and we found the list of the buyers at the Notaire. Some people, such as our neighbor, M. Stenzel, now the mayor, approached us as soon as we arrived to tell us that he had purchased the Vitrine--an heirloom from my father's mother--to safekeep it for us. The buyers had come from far a field. For the most part the restitutions were made willingly, but I remember one incident when we had some trouble recovering our belongings. In Molsheim, about 20 km from Westhoffen, we found the people who had bought our dining room and our bathroom fixtures. They refused us access to their house. Maman and I were pondering about our next move when, by an extraordinary coincidence, we ran into my cousin Roland. He had enlisted in the army and was en route to join his unit. Roland and some of his companions came with us to confront the recalcitrant buyer. She was intimidated by the French soldiers and agreed to return our belongings.

Our former employees had been working for Klemm; and Zeppel, our driver, told us that he had delivered many of our most prized antiques to Klemm's apartment in Strasbourg.

We found some of the other antiques at the Meyerhof. Of course, many things were missing and never recovered, but we were happy to be home again and did not dwell on these losses. After living in danger for five years and coming close to losing our lives, we had learned to view things in their correct perspective.

Slowly, most of our friends returned; those who didn't had perished in concentration camps. Finally, on May 8, 1945, Germany capitulated and the war was over. The concentration camps were liberated by the Allies. The soldiers were horrified at the sight of the emaciated survivors and the terrible accounts they gave of the systematic killing and torture.

Maman returned to Saint-Amand while I stayed reorganizing our household. Uncle Robert returned from his captivity and finally got to see his five-year-old daughter. My cousin Gilbert came back from Dachau, a concentration camp in Germany. He told me later that the camp had been liberated by Americans but was quarantined because of an outbreak of typhoid fever. "After living through this horror, I was not going to die of typhoid," was the thought that kept Gilbert alive. He escaped by hiding in a truck and made his way to Paris. He said that they had stopped in Strasbourg, where he and the three other former inmates who had escaped with him walked around in their striped prison garb without attracting any attention. The four of them were young men who had been in the resistance. Gilbert was met by Uncle Robert at the railroad station when he returned to Saint-Amand, after having been debriefed in Paris. Since Gilbert did not know that his father and brother had been killed, Uncle Robert had to give him the sad news.

Uncle Lucien returned from Buchenwald. He told me that after their liberation, many inmates died when they ate too quickly and too much after starving for such a long time.

My dear cousin Claude did not return. For many months we waited anxiously for him. He had been in the Maquis and we finally found out that he and one of his comrades had been taken prisoner by the retreating

Germans on August 31, 1944. Villagers had seen the departing Germans marching by with two prisoners, with hands tied behind their neck. It is presumed that the Germans shot them and threw their bodies in the Rhone river.



CLAUDE IN 1943. HIS INSCRIPTION ON THE BACK OF THE PICTURE
HOPES THAT THE TIME SPENT IN SAINT-AMAND WILL BE SHORT.

By July 1945 we were resuming our lives in Westhoffen. It seemed like waking up from a long nightmare. For the first time in five years, we could once again plan for our future. I decided to continue my education and enrolled at the University of Strasbourg at the Law School. For one year I commuted to Strasbourg and enjoyed my classes. However, this post-war period was still difficult. We had many shortages, and we were still rationed for food and clothing.

We had many relatives in the United States. My grandfather had three sisters and two brothers who had emigrated from Alsace after the Franco-Prussian War. My grandfather had kept in touch with them, and in 1934, his youngest sister, Tante Rose, had come to visit us. In 1945, our American relatives were relieved to hear that we had survived this ordeal and sent us care packages. Sometimes they contained items we had never seen and looked exotic to us. I remember how puzzled we were seeing a jar of peanut butter. Maman incorporated it into a cake and it was quite good.

As it had happened in 1940 people were again trying to find each other. Each day we read newspaper notices placed by people who were inquiring about missing friends and relatives.

In 1941 I had visited my mother's sister Rose in Toulouse. Maman had sent me there because Tante Rose was not feeling well. While I was there I met Eric. He was a leader in the refugee community and I was very flattered by the attention he paid me. He was planning to leave for the United States with his widowed mother. In retrospect, it is hard for me to imagine how after knowing me for such a brief time--about two weeks--he asked me to marry him.

He was twenty-nine years old and I was seventeen. This is probably hard for you to understand, but mores were different in those days, and I deferred to Maman for my answer. She wisely decided that I was much too young. Eric and his mother reached the United States, where he became a successful businessman.

After the war, he had put a notice in the newspapers to find out if we had survived. I politely answered, thanking him for his concern. We corresponded for a while. He introduced himself to my relatives in New York. My great aunts and my mother's cousins invited me to come and visit

them so I could get reacquainted with him. In May 1947, I decided to go to the States for the summer vacation.

I was overwhelmed by the welcome my family gave me. It was like a different world--everyone seemed carefree and cheerful, quite a contrast with post-war France. The first person I met was Irving Saunders--Grandpa's father. He was a pier superintendent for the United States Line and had the authority to board arriving ships. As a result of this, I was met like an arriving dignitary, rapidly brought to a waiting car inside the pier. His brother, Uncle Lew, was married to Tante Juliet, who was a cousin of my mother.

They all met me at the pier. Eric was also with them. I went to live with Tante Rose. [Grandpa wants me to relate his memory of that day--he said that he remembers his father talking at the dinner table about the beautiful French girl he had met at the pier.]

It quickly became apparent that Eric and I had little in common. I saw him only a few times. Tante Juliet became my mentor, helping me get acclimated. Two weeks after I had arrived, I was invited to a Memorial Day party as a guest of Tante Rose, at the house of Tante Juliet's sister-in-law--the house of Irving and Flora Saunders, Grandpa's parents; this was the day we met. I was impressed by the handsome young man who paid so much attention to me. Our first date was on my birthday, June 29; we got engaged in September and we were married on December 25, 1947. Tante Juliet and Uncle Lew were delighted by the reinforced family alliance. They did not have any children, and thought of us as their surrogate children.

I missed my family in France, but have never regretted staying here to start a new life. I have been very fortunate in establishing a wonderful family of my own.

This reminiscing about my life has helped me to put the terrible war behind me. It has also caused me to take stock of my life. I hope it will help you to see that even when circumstances we cannot control are dominating our life, we have to keep striving and looking toward the future.

It is important for you to realize how important the virtues of kindness and selflessness truly are. All the members of my family who survived did so because they were hidden and protected by strangers. Without these righteous people who risked their lives to save my family members and many more like them, the toll of the Holocaust would have been much higher.

I hope that you will not have to experience such dramatic events, but remember that every life has its unsettling moments; it is important to learn to accept the upsetting events, to see beyond them and to realize that, as in your Grandpa's favorite quote, "This too shall pass."

I am grateful to have had a happy life after my traumatic adolescence. You have all greatly contributed to my happiness.

I wish you a happy, fulfilled life.



DINA REUNITED AT LAST WITH HER FATHER, ROBERT, IN 1945.

Epilogue

Gaby and Robert had two more daughters, Esther and Judith. Robert became the Chief Rabbi of Belgium. When he retired in 1979, they moved to Israel and currently live in Jerusalem. They have nine grandchildren and ten great-grandchildren.

Dina became a teacher. She went to study in Israel and met her husband, Jeroucham Elzas, while working on a kibbutz. Jeroucham was Dutch and had been in a concentration camp as a child. Dina and Jeroucham have two children and five grandchildren.

Jacqueline became a pediatric nurse. In 1955 she married Sisi Wolfermann. Sisi had been in the Auschwitz concentration camp from age sixteen to age nineteen. He lost his parents and younger sister to the Holocaust. Jacqueline and Sisi have a son, Guy, and three grandchildren. They live in Haguenau.

My mother, Marthe Hemmendinger May, lived in Westhoffen until 1956, when she moved to Haguenau. She came to visit us in America twice and enjoyed renewing her acquaintance with her American aunts and cousins. She died in 1967 at age seventy-six.

My cousin, Gilbert May, married his wife Arlette in 1947. He became a successful businessman and is very active in civic affairs. He is the president of the association of those who have been deported and interned, and in this capacity he is a frequent spokesman against racism and violence. He has two sons, Jean-Pierre and Denis, and four grandchildren. He lives in Strasbourg.

Juliet Sieveking Saunders had a very successful career in education. After obtaining a Doctorate in Education, she became a District Superintendent in School District Twenty in Brooklyn. She died at age

eighty-six in 1994. The school library has been named the Juliet Saunders Library in her honor. Her husband Lew (Leonard) died at age fifty-nine.

After I married Harry Saunders in 1947, we lived in New York City for five years. Harry was working during the day and going to college at night. We moved to Nutley, New Jersey, in 1956, and led a quiet suburban life with our children, Michèle and Peter. In 1977, we moved to Stamford, Connecticut, where we still live.

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